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Officers of the Year



San Bernardino County Deputy Sheriff Berend Meelker receives an award from John Nolan during Thursday night's 31st annual law enforcement recognition dinner at the National Orange Show. About 300 people gathered to help pay tribute to members of law enforcement.

Law enforcement's finest honored by county

By Andrew Silva
Staff Writer

SAN BERNARDINO — The jokes and good-natured ribbing typical of an awards banquet blended with a serious purpose Thursday evening — honoring local law enforcement.

"They are more than just uniforms and authority figures. There is a lot they do for the community," said John Nolan, an attorney and member of the San Bernardino Area Chamber of Commerce, which sponsored Thursday's celebration.

Nolan was later subjected to a string of lawyer jokes by his co-host for the gala, Michael Gallo, president of Kelly Space and Technology in San Bernardino.

That prompted San Bernardino Mayor

and former Judge Pat Morris near the end of the program to issue a restraining order against Gallo for "his brand of stand-up comedy."

But before taking the podium, Gallo also expressed his appreciation for the work officers do.

"This is just one demonstration that the community really does care," Gallo said.

About 300 people gathered for the banquet at the National Orange Show Events Center to honor a dozen officers from six agencies, with six of those named Officers of the Year.

If the jokes weren't surprising, perhaps neither was the modesty of those honored.

"When the taxpayers, when our leaders direct money into helicopters and give you

all these neat things to do, you just do your job," said Berend Meelker, a crew chief in the San Bernardino County Sheriff's Department aviation unit, who was one of those named Officer of the Year.

The other nominees from the sheriff's department were Dan Glozer, an arson and explosives expert, and Daniel Armenta, an expert on accident investigations.

San Bernardino Police Officer of the Year Joseph Valdivia, 33, spent four years in the narcotics unit and was assigned to the U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration Multiple Enforcement Team.

During his time there, he worked on in-depth investigations into Hispanic gangs and the Mexican Mafia, leading to numerous arrests and seizures.

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"We were running and gunning for two years" on those cases, he said.

He also praised his colleagues.

"I'm very excited, very proud," he said. "I'm kind of speechless. So many others are deserving."

The other nominees from the police department were William Harps, a firearms instructor and tactics expert, and John Cardillo, an accident reconstructionist, the highest level in that discipline.

From the California Highway Patrol, Officer Sean Cooper was named Officer of the Year for his work with the public and the media as a public affairs officer.

"I'm shocked, really," the 37-year-old San Bernardino resident said.

He conducts "Start Smart" driving training for teenagers, and "Right Turn" sessions for middle schools to deter young people from using drugs and alcohol.

The reward for him is that "I can see positive results almost instantaneously — and I'm the good guy," he said.

The other nominees from the CHP were:

■ Alton Gunnoe III, who often serves as a training officer and provides counseling to fellow officers and their spouses.

■ Sgt. Tom Cunningham, who oversees up to 15 officers.

The other honorees were:

■ Lee Fields of the Cal State San Bernardino Police Department, who previously received an award from Mothers Against Drunk Driving for his enforcement efforts against impaired drivers;

■ Alex Raya of the San Bernardino City Unified School District Police Department for his expertise and work with youth gangs;

■ Chris Tamayo of the San Bernardino Community College Police Department for his deep involvement in the college, and key contributions in moving the department to a new station on the San Bernardino Valley College campus.

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